



Killing Your Darlings

Doug Johnstone

I LOVE EDITING. This is a statement that a lot of my fellow writers will hate, tearing their hair out at the very suggestion of changes to their precious work, but it's true. In fact, I love editing much more than any other stage of the writing process, much more than planning or writing the first draft. To my mind, writing *is* editing.

My favourite quote about editing is by Dr Seuss: 'So the writer who breeds more words than he needs,/ Is making a chore for the reader who reads.' Then of course there's Hemingway's choice nugget that 'the first draft of anything is shit'. I wholeheartedly agree. I know my first drafts are shit, for sure.

But that's when the real work starts. You can get your teeth into a flawed manuscript, tear it to pieces, move chunks around, delete large sections, write whole new sections. And then cut, cut, cut. Trim that novel down until every ounce of excess material, every unnecessary piece of punctuation, word, sentence, paragraph, section and scene is gone.

I have a sign above my desk that reads: 'Every word must justify its existence', and I live and die by that piece of advice. If something is not serving the story in some way, cut it. Repetitions? Cut them. Tautologies? Cut them. Pleonasms? Cut them. And kill those darlings too. The pieces of writing that writers are most fond of are usually the ones that need cut first.

Flowery description? Cut it. Poignant internal monologue? Cut it.



Expositional dialogue? Cut it. Info dump about that riveting piece of background research you did? Definitely cut it. If anything isn't completely vital to the story, get it out of there.

The first draft of the novel I've just finished working on was 107,000 words long, which is the longest book I've ever written. The draft I submitted to my editor was 82,000 words. That means that I lost a quarter of the words, almost 25,000. And the book is a hundred times better for it.

When I'm in editing mode, I almost can't read other writers' work, because everything feels overwritten. I can't stop my internal editor adding imaginary comments in the margins — 'unnecessary', 'repetitive', 'inconsistent', and so on.

In fact, this happens even when I'm not in editing mode. I read a lot of published novels that really could've done with killing some of those darlings. This is the most often the case with famous writers, the ones who have sold millions of books. Editors are obviously reluctant to take a red pen to the overblown prose of someone who has earned their company a huge amount of cash, so the books get bigger and bigger, but definitely not better.

My favourite writers, such as James M. Cain, Joan Didion and James Sallis, write short books, books that do exactly what they need to in the fewest words possible, then they end. And now, so does this piece.